

Starting Over

As much as I love repeating it, I won't attempt to slip the late Danny McGoorty's description of Willie Hoppe shooting left handed past the BD editors. Instead I recommend finding a copy of Robert Byrne's 1972 masterpiece, *McGoorty: The Story of a Billiard Bum*, to read the original comment in all its splendor. In the meantime, try to picture a baby bear enjoying a little time with himself. It's a funny image made funnier by the fact that it's directed at one of the game's immortal greats. And, since I just started to work on my own left-handed game, I think about that little bear a lot lately and laugh, wondering why I can't even manage to look that good.

For whatever reason, I had never really devoted any time to honing my ambidextrous skills, mostly ignoring the matter once I knew could lean over the side rail and pocket a simple shot. But I've always envied those players who seem to handle the cue with equal deftness on both sides. And so when I recently discovered the bar table, I decided it would be a good time to work on my southpaw game, spending entire sessions some nights shooting exclusively left handed and finding it more than a little humbling. As I expected I'm playing poorly, missing easy shots and blowing the simplest position, but improving. What I did not expect is the insight I'm gaining into the learning process and a profound, new respect for the challenges that beginners face.

Before attempting to play entire games left handed, I anticipated a lack of coordination with my weak hand. And it's there alright, on every shot, just as I knew it would be. I did not however expect to feel like I'm inhabiting someone else's body, as I encounter a sense of strangeness around a pool table that I've never felt. Sometimes it's as if I were a visitor to my own profession, searching for things that I know I know. Most troubling is an inability to make a good, or the same, stance every time. And without a focused effort I often fail to come close. For a lot of shots I have an acceptable bridge, so I wonder why I can't rely on my so-called good hand to form certain rail bridges or get me over a ball. That wouldn't help much at this stage anyway since elevating the cue with proficiency still waits in the future. And most perplexing, I can't seem to stretch for a lot of shots I would reach comfortably right handed. Am I shorter as a lefty?

Normally I'm pleased with my own fundamentals and I always emphasize the value of sound ones. So now I wonder where mine came from since my only real memory of working consciously to learn any basics came after I saw a photo of myself as a teenager and changed my stance to copy Mosconi's. But if that change came with difficulty, I've forgotten about it somewhere along the way. In light of my current struggle I can see why the best athletes still practice their foundational skills every day. Merely knowing what's correct is not enough as evidenced in my shameful, left-handed grip, stance, bridge and, especially, stroke. When any one of those elements strays off course, the simplest shots feel foreign, and I must stand up and start again from the beginning to get myself on track. The more there is to think about, the harder it is to regroup. And, when shooting left handed, it seems sometimes that I have to think about everything, even for simple shots.

Because we execute best in the absence of thinking, any concerns that arise during the moment of execution will almost invariably distract us enough to cause a miss. But

another, and perhaps worse, distraction is a nagging feeling of discomfort owing to an awkward stance or any other misapplied fundamental. We all encounter that occasionally, some days more than others, and we all know the remedy. Stand up and start over. But when it seems to occur on nearly every shot, we cannot always get everything to fall into place, no matter how hard we try. In the worst cases I feel myself so far removed from what I'm doing that, instead of bothering with further corrections, I simply give up and rush the shot so I can miss and get it over with sooner.

Along with the extra frustration however, I'm also gaining a deeper appreciation for the challenges that beginners face. We all confront these adversities; it's just that beginners must deal with them almost constantly. Intellectually I know what works best, but in my new pursuit my body does not always agree with my brain. And that's how it is for anyone who looks at a shot and then has to think about stance and grip and bridge and stroke and on and on. Of course, we must always think about all of those things—except in those situations when we may want to pocket a ball. Sadly, ignoring them doesn't work either since we won't pocket many balls without sound fundamentals. So, if any of this sounds familiar, the good news is that I have found a remedy.

Because it's so difficult for me to focus on both the balls and myself I decided to separate the two. Now, when I want to work on my fundamentals I do it at home where, instead of a pool table, I have a desk. And I isolate each component to work on it by itself. First I begin with a basic stance and its formation. I form one a few times on my natural side, paying close attention to each step so I can mirror it on the left side. Normally I begin the stance by placing my right foot onto the line of the shot then stepping forward with the left foot. So, as a lefty I do the opposite, placing the left foot onto the line of the shot and then stepping forward with the right foot. As long as I practice with no balls, or worries about pocketing them, I soon find myself forming a stable, balanced stance without thinking. Then I separate every fundamental and address it in a similar way; study righty, imitate lefty. I practice elevation by bridging over the tape dispenser and aiming at the lamp. Then I get in front of a mirror and examine my stroke, first right handed, then left handed until it looks good. Finally, I nominate a desk item as an object ball and put all my fundamentals together until my stance sets up and aligns my stroke to shoot the paperweight into the pen holder—with a nice pause before the last stroke of course. Pretending to shoot on my desk is not a pool substitute but it allows me to focus completely on my fundamentals without threatening a single shot. And, I can do it in my jammies.

Next month, BD editor, Audra Quinn, will begin her pool education and then share the experience with a new column that addresses the subject of learning and improving from square one. As I now know firsthand, beginners notice everything, so I'll be looking forward to her insights. Then, before the year is out, I'm going to challenge her to a game of desk pool.

